

# Easy Cooking for One or Two

*Sometimes it can be hard to cook small meals. Single-serving convenience meals can be costly, and may contain a lot of fat and salt. The following tips can help you cut back on food waste, eat healthy, and stay within your budget!*

Once you have the basic strategies down, and shopping under control, cooking can be a simple process. Again, you are faced with challenges: perhaps a tight budget, a crowded schedule or loneliness at meal time. Take heart! Whatever your circumstances, you can meet these challenges with success.

The following packet is designed to provide a basic understanding of the food groups and why it is important to have them all in your diet. Each section includes some Money Saving shopping tips and several meal ideas. NO RECIPES NECESSARY! The meal ideas are designed to use items you have in the house and your imagination.

After reading this, cooking healthy for one should be a piece of cake, whether you have a recipe or not!

**ENJOY!**



## Grains/Starch

**These foods provide complex carbohydrates (starches) which are an important source of energy. They also provide vitamins, minerals and fiber.**

**Some money-saving buying tips for Grains include:**

- ❖ Buy regular-type rice and oats. The instant types cost over twice as much per serving.
- ❖ Add your own seasonings and sauces to rice and pasta.
- ❖ Look for bargains on day-old bread and freeze it. Also, you can freeze bagels, English muffins, rolls, etc. and thaw it just enough before each meal.
- ❖ Buy cereal in large boxes instead of small, separate packages and package your own.

## **Meal Ideas:**

- For breakfast, try a sandwich of thinly spread peanut butter with banana on whole wheat bread, bagel, or pita.
- Bowl of non-sweetened cereal with low fat milk and fruit
- Use your imagination to top baked white or sweet potatoes:
  - nonfat plain or lemon yogurt
  - low fat cheese (no more than 5 grams of fat per ounce)
  - barbecue sauce
  - sautéed onions and vegetables
  - black beans, chili
  - vegetable, lentil, or low fat cream soup
  - broccoli florets, mushrooms, and a bit of grated cheese to a baked potato

- Use pasta or brown rice as the base for a terrific meal. While the pasta or rice cooks:
  - chop up a few of your favorite raw vegetables and chunks of cooked chicken or turkey.
  - or you can substitute kidney or garbanzo beans and a bit of low fat cheese for the poultry.
  - you may also stir-fry or steam vegetables and poultry quickly, combine with pasta or rice, and top with low fat pasta sauce, Mexican salsa, or a bit of low fat dressing.
  - tomatoes, onion, green peppers, and black olives with some Italian salad dressing for a chilled pasta salad
  - Chicken, cheese, and tomato sauce (you can freeze the extra sauce) for a chicken parmesan meal
- Low-fat cheese and tomato sauce on an English muffin for a homemade pizza

***Tip:** When making an oven meal, bake potatoes, muffins or rice at the same time and freeze for later use. Heat in a microwave, toaster oven or oven for a quick meal accompaniment.*

## Vegetables

**Vegetables provide vitamins, minerals and fiber. They are naturally low in fat and they fill you up.**

**Do you avoid buying fresh vegetables because you think they'll spoil in your refrigerator before you can use them? Before you cross them off your list try these suggestions:**

- ❖ Wash vegetables when ready to use; they will last longer. One exception is a head of lettuce that can be washed all at once and stored in a plastic bag for about 4 days.

- ❖ Buy vegetables in season -- they'll be cheaper; or when they're on sale.
- ❖ Place unused portions of green peppers and onions on a tray or cookie sheet in the freezer. After they are frozen, pop into freezer bags to use in casseroles or other cooked dishes.
- ❖ If you are too busy to peel and chop, and don't mind the expense, buy small portions of fresh, chopped vegetables from the grocery store salad bar to steam or stir-fry. They are more expensive per pound, but not more costly overall if you buy a large amount and end up throwing much away due to spoilage.
- ❖ Choose fresh vegetables that will keep well for a week or more, such as beets, cabbage, carrots, celery, parsnips, potatoes and winter squash
- ❖ Fresh produce is great, but don't be afraid to shop for frozen vegetables. They are comparable to fresh in nutritional value and can be microwaved, steamed or marinated just like the fresh ones.
- ❖ Buy plain canned or plain frozen vegetables instead of those with added seasonings and sauces or those sold in boil-in-the-bag packages, which are usually more expensive.

### **Meal Ideas:**

- Steam fresh or frozen vegetables and season with your favorite spices.
- Add fresh onions, mushrooms, and peppers to bottled or canned spaghetti sauce.
- Mix sliced yellow squash or green peas with rice mixes.
- Mix tomato soup, chili beans, chopped carrots, peppers, and onions, and your favorite seasonings with rice for a hearty dish.

- Add diced onion, celery, carrots, a touch of garlic powder, and a hint of lemon juice to spice up canned tomato soup.
- stir-fry or steam vegetables and poultry quickly, Let everything cool then toss with lettuce and low fat dressing for a great chef's salad.

*Tip:* Use your microwave. It can help reduce kitchen mess and cooking time. Microwave meals can be prepared with less fat by adding bouillon, wine or broths.

## Fruits

**Two to 4 servings per day of fruits and fruit juices provide important nutrients like vitamins A and C and potassium. Fruits are naturally low in fat and sodium.**

### **Shopping tips for Fruits:**

- ❖ Apples, bananas, oranges, grapefruit, grapes, melons, nectarines, peaches and pears keep well or are easily used.
- ❖ Just like vegetables, buy fruit in season to save money.
- ❖ Eating whole fruits provides needed fiber, but if you like juice, read the label to make sure you're getting 100 percent juice and not fruit drink.
- ❖ Fruits canned in light syrups or juices provide fewer calories and a more "true" fruit flavor.

### **Meal Ideas:**

- Keep fruit that doesn't need to be refrigerated on the table where you'll see it and remember to eat it.
- Make melon balls out of fresh fruit and freeze in small portions. You can freeze grapes too!

## Dairy

**There are many low fat and non-fat choices in this food group and choosing them can help reduce fat in your diet.**

### **Shopping Tips:**

- ❖ If you need only a small amount of cheese, buy it from the deli department if your store has one.
- ❖ Buy nonfat dry milk and dry buttermilk for cooking. They are shelf-stable for long periods of time and can help you avoid throwing away fresh milk that has spoiled because you only needed a small amount.

### **Meal Ideas:**

- Add grated low fat cheese to grits.
- Add fresh fruit to plain low fat yogurt.
- Consider skim milk or low fat pudding and yogurt for snack.
- Add powdered dry milk to baked goods.
- Use cottage cheese in baked casseroles.

## Protein

**Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs and Nuts are all sources of protein. One-half cup cooked dry beans, 1 egg, or 2 tablespoons of peanut butter count as 1 ounce of meat. This group provides protein, B vitamins, iron and zinc.**

### **Shopping Tips:**

- ❖ Meat, poultry and fish is often cheaper if you buy the "family size." When you get it home divide the purchase into portions for one or two, wrap with heavy duty foil or freezer wrap, label and freeze. If you want to freeze the meat in larger packages, plastic wrap can be placed between individual meat patties or pieces so one or two servings can be easily removed.
- ❖ When cooking dry beans or peas, soak and cook extra and freeze in small portions.
- ❖ One-half dozen eggs can be purchased in most stores if you ask.

### **Meal Ideas:**

- For meats, use low fat cooking methods like broiling or roasting and limit your portion sizes to lower fat intake
- Make grains, vegetables and fruit the focus of your meals by using small amounts of meat as ingredients to add flavor, texture and protein to salads, casseroles or soups. This is a great place to use leftover meat, fish or poultry.
- Make an Egg white omelet with your favorite veggies and low fat cheese
- If you have a crock-pot, put diced chicken, vegetables, liquid and spices into it in the morning and come home to ready-to-eat stew.

## Snack Ideas

**Many times a tough question is what to eat for a snack. Here are some healthy suggestions that incorporate different food groups.**

- Dry cereal (non-sweetened cereal)
- Non-fat plain yogurt with fruit and granola
- Crackers with small amount of peanut butter
- Popcorn (place kernels in pot with small coating of oil and pop on the stove) Avoid adding butter or buying microwave popcorn, which can be costly
- Low-fat cheese and crackers
- Piece of fruit
- Raw vegetables and dip



## Convenience foods

**Convenience foods are the salvation of many singles, but they often lack the nutritional quality, texture and flavor of home-cooked foods. You can boost nutrition and enhance the flavor of these foods by adding your favorite spices, vegetables or meat. Try the following ideas.**

- Add fresh onions, mushrooms and peppers to canned spaghetti sauce.
- Top frozen pizza with tomatoes, peppers and mushrooms.
- Mix yellow squash, green peas and grated carrots with a prepared rice mix.
- Add fresh onions, peppers, beans and tomato sauce to cooked rice.
- Add chopped green onion, celery, and a touch of garlic powder to spice up canned tomato soup.

- Try a breakfast of frozen waffles. They're more expensive than making your own, but they're quick. Top them with fresh or frozen fruit, hot applesauce or low fat fruit yogurt.
- Serve fruit and vegetables as side dishes to frozen microwave dinners.

### To Buy or Not To Buy in Bulk

Prepackaged, individual-serving items tend to be more expensive than larger packages or bulk quantities. At times you may prefer the convenience of individual portions, while at other times you may want to save money by buying in bulk. For example, when time is at a premium and money isn't a big issue, you may opt for a package of skinned, ready-to-cook chicken breasts. When your schedule is less busy and you want to save money, buy a whole chicken, cut it up yourself and freeze in meal-size servings.

Avoiding waste may be another reason to keep small-quantity items on hand. Opening a large can of fruit and throwing half of it away because it spoiled is no way to save money!

You will need to decide for yourself what is most important in each situation: time-savings? convenience? saving money? storage space? flavor? nutrition? a combination of needs? Take a little time and think about what needs are most important to you and how you will meet those needs.

Many times a larger package may be less expensive, but don't buy it if you cannot use the larger quantity. Also consider what the food will be used for. The least expensive is not always equal in quality to more expensive brands. But it is not always the worst quality either. Consider alternative forms like fresh, frozen, refrigerated, canned or dried and also consider the intended use, brand, grade, quantity, size and convenience.

## Leftovers

**No matter how carefully meals are planned, left-overs are bound to occur. Fortunately, it is not difficult to put most of them to use.**

### Fruit

- Canned or fresh fruit can be added to salads, pureed and used as pancake sauce or on toast, or placed on top of roasted chicken.
- Fruit juice can be frozen in ice cube trays and used for flavoring and chilling fruit drinks.
- Canned or fresh fruit can be added to muffin, quick bread or pancake batter.

### Vegetables

- Cooked vegetables can be used in an omelet, in a casserole, in soups, or marinated in a nonfat Italian salad dressing for a quick cold salad.
- Chopped raw onions, celery or green peppers can be frozen in freezer bags or containers for use in soups, stews or casseroles.

### Breads and cereals

- Make crumbs for topping or breading for chicken or fish.
- Use for French toast.
- Make melba toast -- remove crust, roll thinly and bake at 150 degrees F until crisp.
- Add cooked macaroni to a casserole or soup, or use cold in salads.
- Stir-fry cooked rice with chopped vegetables, add leftover meat or poultry at the last minute and serve with low sodium soy sauce.
- Add cooked rice to puddings or casseroles.

<http://www.ext.nodak.edu/extpubs/yf/foods/he516w.htm#getready>

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# Healthy Cooking For ONE

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**Plan ahead.** When you go home and stare into an empty fridge, Burger King might sound too tempting. Think out your meals before shopping: three to four meat or fish servings, three to four vegetables, etc.

**Know how to store.** Those little plastic containers and Ziploc bags are great. When buying meats or other bulk foods, separate into single-serving portions, label and freeze. If you cook, cook big, store in smaller containers and freeze. Leftovers get boring, so don't just refrigerate large amounts.

**Single-serving products.** There are more processed, individual-portioned foods than ever before. You'll have to weed through much of the non-nutritional and over-nutritional (high fat, high calorie), but there are more frozen dinners to choose from such as pasta and rice "bowl" meals, single vegetables and sandwiches, salads and baked deli chicken.

**Get the vegetables.** They are not optional foods for large families only. This is the most slighted food group when eating for one. People are quick to throw meat in the macaroni and cheese, heat up the spaghetti and dine on sandwiches or cereal, but where's the broccoli?

Buy the frozen vegetables in the little boxes, which are perfect for one or two people. Season with a little bouillon or butter sprinkles and microwave to steam. Other quick and easy microwavable vegetables are baby carrots, broccoli, zucchini and squash. Canned vegetables aren't too bad, and they have small cans with pull-tab tops for individual servings.

**Baked potatoes make great meal vehicles.** While they shouldn't be your only vegetable, they can carry chopped broccoli, or other leftover vegetables with or without meat stirred in.

**Stir-fry.** Start with a little chopped meat. Toss in fresh or frozen veggies or even leftovers for an easy, quick meal -- with or without rice. No wok required.

**Eggs.** Yes, they have lots of cholesterol, but, no, a couple won't kill you. If you are worried about it, get the cartons of the Second Nature or Egg Beaters. They are very convenient and less messy than cracking eggs. They can even be jazzed up with any combination of chopped ham, bacon bits, low-fat cheese, chopped tomato and green onions. It's not just for breakfast anymore.

**Pasta is a good base to start a meal.** It's very easy to cook just the needed amount, add sauce and, of course, a vegetable.

**Foil it.** Tin foil makes a great pouch to cook meats in. Spray foil before inserting a piece of chicken, fish, pork or whatever meat. Douse with spices, barbeque sauce, salsa or pesto. Wrap up and toss in the toaster oven until done. Easy clean up, too.

**Transform the leftovers.** Some love them, some hate them. If you have a leftover piece of steak, chicken or fish, don't just heat it up again the next night. Chop it up and toss on a pre-made salad, or in a stir-fry.

### **Grilled Salmon with Ginger Orange Glaze**

This recipe is easy enough for one, but good enough for a crowd. Have it with a salad or broccoli. Beats Cheerios any day.

1/4 cup orange juice  
1/4 cup soy sauce  
1/4 cup cream sherry  
1/4 cup Dijon mustard  
2 Tbsp. grated; peeled fresh ginger  
2 Tbsp. honey  
4 (6-oz.) salmon fillets

Combine first 6 ingredients in a large zip-top plastic bag. Add fish to bag; marinate in refrigerator 30 minutes. Remove fish from bag; reserve marinade. Grill or broil fish. Place remaining marinade in a saucepan; bring to a boil. Serve with fish.

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